

Local Health Departments Play a Key Role in Suicide Prevention

Local health departments are well-positioned in their communities to initiate, lead, and/or support comprehensive, community-based suicide prevention efforts.

The Problem

Suicide is an urgent and growing public health issue in the United States. According to the [CDC](#), in 2022 alone:

- Suicide was a leading cause of death in the U.S. and was responsible for over 49,000 deaths.
- An estimated 13.2 million adults seriously thought about suicide, 3.8 million made a plan, and 1.6 million attempted suicide.

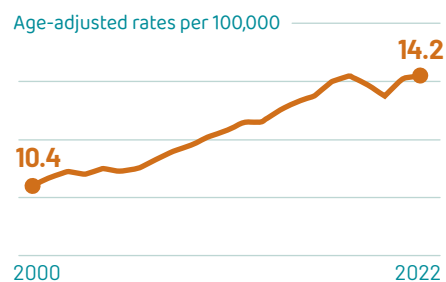
While suicide impacts every community, research and data consistently show that certain groups experience higher rates of suicide, suicide attempts, or suicidal thoughts than the general population.¹ Differences in suicide rates are observed across different factors such as age, race, ethnicity, sex, and occupational groups.²

Learn more about disproportionately affected populations in the [2024 National Strategy for Suicide Prevention](#).

Suicide rates also differ according to geographic region. Rural regions typically have higher rates of suicide than more densely populated regions.¹

Despite a small dip in 2019 and 2020, suicide rates in the U.S. have been steadily increasing for the past twenty years and returned to their peak with a more than 5% increase between 2020 and 2022.³

Suicide rates continue to increase



Though the reasons behind rising rates are not definitively known, there are several potential contributing factors. Data show a growing mental health crisis in the U.S., particularly among youth.⁴ Between 2015 and 2020, there were notable increases in depression among Americans 12 and up, a trend that was exacerbated by COVID-19 pandemic-related factors.^{4,5}

Americans are also experiencing an 'epidemic of loneliness', which has likely been accelerated by the recent rise in technology/social media use and by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ Individuals are less socially connected and have smaller social networks⁶, which may be contributing to increased risks for suicidal ideation and attempts.

Additional societal-level factors at play include increased financial stressors, such as growing income inequality and the lack of economic growth in rural areas.^{6,7} Easy access to lethal means among people at risk, such as firearms,^{7,8} combined with the trends noted above create dangerous conditions.

Local Health Departments – Part of the Solution

Suicide is a complex public health issue that is influenced by a wide range of interrelated factors across the lifespan.

Fortunately, suicide is preventable.⁹

Effective strategies to reduce risks and promote factors that protect against suicide do exist.¹⁰ Communities can adopt a public health approach to suicide prevention to reduce risks and center upstream efforts that prevent the onset of suicide risks.

Local health departments (LHDs) have experience and expertise in applying a public health approach to improve population-level health outcomes. LHDs are charged with protecting the safety, health, and wellbeing of the community. Because mental health *is* health, suicide prevention should be in LHDs' scope.

LHDs are uniquely positioned for highly collaborative work that is tailored to their community context like comprehensive suicide prevention. As neutral conveners of their community, LHDs can act as the hub of a wheel connecting multi-sector partners in coordinated suicide prevention efforts.

Suicide prevention efforts must be rooted in the cultural context of the community and based on the community's specific needs. LHDs know their community and have a finger on the pulse of what the needs are. LHDs may also have access to data that can guide planning and prioritization.

While the role of LHDs in suicide prevention will vary, some examples include:

- Raising awareness through public messaging campaigns or resource sharing
- Coordinating partners
- Implementing or evaluating programming
- Sharing data and utilizing surveillance capacity
- Training community members/partners
- Advocating for local policy change

NACCHO hopes to continue to grow its offerings (projects, resources, peer networking opportunities) to support LHDs to fully realize their unique role in local suicide prevention efforts.

Use the “How to get started” section of [this training](#) to learn more about ways LHDs can advance the 2024 National Strategy for Suicide Prevention.

To subscribe to NACCHO's Suicide Prevention mailing list, go to your [My NACCHO](#) account and select “Suicide Prevention Newsletter” under “My Subscriptions.”

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